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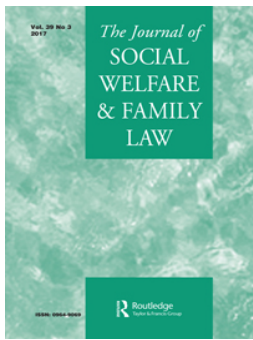
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GENERAL SECTION



Freedom of choice, gender equality, or employment promotion? Finnish party positions on childcare in the light of election manifestos 2015

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ABSTRACT

The principle of freedom of choice in childcare matters has been a central element of Finnish family policy since the 1980s and is something that makes the country unique in an international comparison. On the one hand, this principle has been manifested as a legislated right for parents, notably mothers, to choose paid work supported by the use of public childcare. On the other hand, it has also given parents with children under three the right to stay at home with their children and to receive a child home care allowance during this period. This dualism has been widely popular among parents and has also been seen by most leading parties as something that is good for families. However, since the outbreak of the international financial crisis, this system has faced increasing criticism from some experts and politicians, which has made the principle of freedom of choice, and especially the child home care allowance/leave, susceptible to renegotiation. This article investigates how the principle of freedom of choice was politicized by eight leading parties during the Finnish parliamentary election campaign in 2015, through an analysis of election manifestos. First, we analyse to what extent this principle was politicized, and by whom. Secondly, we study how the principle was framed. The findings show that the principle of freedom of choice was a rather politicized topic, creating a cleavage between conservative and leftist/liberal parties. Moreover, they indicate a renegotiation of this principle in favour of higher parental employment promotion and gender equality.

KEYWORDS

Freedom of choice; family policy; public childcare; child home care; politicisation; election manifesto; Finland

Introduction

Every welfare state is founded on a series of principles, values and ideas that underpin and shape its social policy system (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hewitt, 1992; Kildal & Kuhle, 2005). For example, as a member of the Nordic family policy model (Hiilamo, 2002; Korpi, 2000) Finland has not only nurtured the idea of universal benefits, gender equality and public childcare for families, but it has also distinguished itself from other Nordic countries through a stronger emphasis on the principle of freedom of choice in questions relating to

childcare, perhaps most notably through the child home care allowance system (Hiilamo, 2002; Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009). This dualism of public childcare and state-subsidized child home care emanates from a historical and political compromise between the political left and agrarian/conservative parties in the 1970s and 1980s, and even though it has been contested from time to time, it has remained a cornerstone of Finnish family and care policies (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; Tyyskä, 1995; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000).

However, since the outbreak of the international financial crisis, the scepticism towards this dualism, and notably the child home care system, began to grow as it was increasingly argued by some experts that this system, *inter alia*, creates traps for women or, in other words, obstructs work–family reconciliation, and acts as a barrier to employment for mothers (Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö [STM], 2011). Some years later, the universal provision of full-day public childcare also became debated, as the Finnish economy showed no signs of foreseeable recovery (Autto & Nygård, 2014). As a consequence, during the last four to five years the principle of freedom to choose, and most notably the right to child home care, has been increasingly politicized in the Finnish public debate, and the government has on several occasions proposed cuts in this system, and more recently, an insertion of a gender quota that forces parents to share the leave (Autto & Nygård, 2014).

The aim of this article is to investigate how the principle of freedom of choice in relation to childcare was politicized during the Finnish parliamentary election campaign in 2015. The reason for this is twofold: First, as discussed previously, Finland can be seen as a unique member of the Nordic family policy league, through its dualistic accentuation of freedom of choice for parents in questions relating to childcare. Second, the recent years of growing criticism of this principle from an economic and a gender equality perspective raises the question of where Finnish parties currently stand on this issue. Therefore, the article focuses on the most recent election campaign, as a case for showing how this principle was politicized, and it analyses election manifestos and some supplementary programmes of the eight most influential parties with representation in the parliament.

According to Heywood (2007), 'politicization' refers to processes where actors create, preserve and renegotiate the rules for the distribution of common resources and the solving of social problems. Since such deliberations on a parliamentary arena are informed to a large extent by parties, and their ideological views, the article uses theory on party ideologies and the 'parties matter' argument (e.g. Budge & Robertson, 1987; Korpi & Palme, 2003). Our first research question is to what extent this principle was politicized in the election manifestos, and by whom? Secondly, we ask, if there was a sign of a renegotiation of this principle in terms of claims for amendments to the existing childcare programmes, and if so, in what way, and how were such manoeuvres framed? If signs of such a renegotiation are visible, could this possibly indicate an ongoing shift away from the 'Nordic' approach to family policy in Finland?

The article contributes to the literature on family policy change in at least two ways. First, it points at the importance of politics, and the highly contested nature of family and care policy (Tyyskä, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995, 2011). In order to understand how policies come to be, and how they are renegotiated, we need to investigate how such underlying principles are politicized, contested and (re)framed in political discourses (Schmidt, 2002). Second, by focusing on the politicization of freedom of choice, and by linking the analysis to contextual factors, the article sheds light on the ideological drivers of social policy change (cf. George & Wilding, 1985; Taylor, 2007).

We argue that the principle of freedom of choice was indeed politicized in the election manifestos, most notably in relation to child home care, but also in relation to parental leave, creating a distinction between three of the conservative parties on the one hand, and the leftist/liberal parties, supplemented by the conservative National Coalition Party (NCP) on the other. The results indicate a partial renegotiation of this principle in the election manifestos, in favour of higher parental employment promotion and gender equality.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, we discuss theoretical starting points by pointing at the significance of parties and ideologies for family policy, and by listing previous research in this field. Thereafter, we discuss the data and methods, and in the following chapter the findings are presented. The final section offers some conclusions, together with a discussion about the findings.

Parties, ideologies and family policy

The literature on family policy distinguishes between various theoretical traits when it comes to explaining the emergence, design and change of family policy. The first of these explains family policy mainly as a function of changing structural, social and economic needs (Gauthier, 1996), the second focuses on the political struggle between conflicting interests and actor groups (Montanari, 2000; Wennemo, 1994), the third uses institutional considerations as its starting points (Ferrarini, 2006) and the fourth tradition emphasises the role of ideas (e.g. Kuebler, 2007). Theoretically, this article departs from the second trait by focusing on the role of party ideologies, for the outlook of family policy (Tyyskä, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995, 2001) and the ‘politics matter’ contention (Allan & Scruggs, 2004; Budge & McDonald, 2006; Budge & Robertson, 1987; Castles, 1998; Huber & Stephens, 2001; Korpi & Palme, 2003), which argues that politics – and notably parties – play a vital role for the development and changes in welfare policy, as well as family policy. One main argument underlying this theoretical trait is the assumption that political parties represent different groups or classes in society, and that these interests shape the behaviour of parties in politics. Another contention is that parties also position themselves in relation to ideologies, and that such formulations bear certain expectations, claims and discourses on the state, the economy and the market (Nygård, 2003, 2006) on the state’s role for social welfare. According to the literature on party ideology (e.g. Freedman, 1996; Seliger, 1976), parties formulate party-specific belief systems, which not only define their core values and principles of *modus operandi*, but also provide heuristic guidance in complex situations. These systems consist of a deeper core of fundamental normative and ontological axioms about the world, as well as a more dynamic core of operative frameworks and considerations for achieving strategic goals and influencing day-to-day politics (Seliger, 1976). The fundamental aspect of party ideology is often formulated in general party programmes or similar documents that serve as guidance for members and followers. The more operative considerations and direct recommendations for action are on the other hand formulated in more specific programmes, such as election manifestos (Budge & McDonald, 2006; Budge & Robertson, 1987).

However, in many Western democracies with a legacy of (broad) government coalitions, parties operate in an environment influenced by both political compromise (Kitschelt, 2001) and state ‘cartelism’ (Katz & Mair, 1995), which suggests that parties cannot be altogether externalized from the state, and that some influential parties can be said to have their

tentacles penetrating many sectors within the state itself. Moreover, in a Finnish context, some parties are ‘insiders’ – i.e. natural parties for government – whereas others are outsiders, i.e. the natural opposition forces or parties that play a supporting role, filling in gaps to build a coalition with support from a majority of MPs, such as the Swedish People’s Party (SPP) for instance (Mickelsson, 2007; Nousiainen, 1998). This can be expected to have some bearing on the ideological orientations of parties, at least when it comes to strategic considerations in relations to campaigns and election manifestos (Budge & Robertson, 1987; Kitschelt, 2001), so that ideological positions of ‘insiders’ – for example – are more informed by concerns for the economic performance of the nation, and less prone to express clear or distinct positions than are ‘outsiders’ (Löwdin, 1998).

How have these theoretical starting points been implemented in family policy, in the light of previous research? Family policy can be defined as all the things the state does for the family (Gauthier, 1996; Kamerman & Kahn, 2003). Traditionally, the main objectives of Finnish family policy have been to redistribute family incomes, both horizontally and vertically, and to facilitate high (female) employment and work–life balance through investments in public day care (Hiilamo, 2002). The origins of this system are in the mid-war poor relief systems, but it was gradually developed during the post-war period starting with the introduction of universal child benefits in the late-1940s (Hiilamo, 2002). In the 1960s, income-related parental insurance was introduced, and in the 1970s investments were made in the childcare system. Around 1990, the Finnish family policy system had evolved into a relatively extensive and ‘de-familised’ system that not only facilitated female employment and promoted gender equality, but also gave parents freedom to choose between public and home childcare (Forssén, Jaakola, & Ritakallio, 2008; Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009).

Ideologically, this system has been founded on a mixture of social democratic and agrarian/conservative values (Anttonen & Sipilä, 2000; Hiilamo, 2002; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000). The first set of values relate to (gender) equality and incorporate income redistribution between different families, as well as notions of ‘positive freedom’ (Taylor, 2007), that is, *freedom to* social security. Consequently, since the 1970s the accentuation of public day care rights can be seen as a freedom for mothers, and increasingly for fathers as well, to choose between domestic work and labour market participation (Autto, 2012, 2015). The latter set of values, in turn, emphasize the inherent value of the family institution along with traditional family roles, but it also reflects the right, or freedom, to decide in matters that relate to the family, that is, it can be seen as a freedom from state interventionism – or a ‘negative freedom’ (Taylor, 2007) or ‘negative right’ (Hobson & Lister, 2002). Accordingly, some matters – such as child rearing or care – should be kept out of reach for the state (Zimmerman, 2001). Another way of looking at it is to use the distinction between ‘familism’ and ‘de-familism’ (Jallinoja, 2006), where the first relates to traditional family structures, gendered family roles and values, whereas the latter emphasizes gender equality and a dual-earner model of family roles. According to Jallinoja (2006), ‘familism’ enjoys a long, deep-rooted history in Finland, due to its agrarian tradition and late industrialization, and it has been able to prevail and even grow stronger during the 2000s.

Politically, the system stems from social pacts and historical compromises between conservatives, the working class, employers and farmers. One example is the political quarrel about the institutional configuration of the Finnish parental insurance system and the income-related parental allowance, which was introduced in the 1960s as a part of the national sickness insurance system (Hiilamo, 2002). While farmers and the communists

supported a system of flat-rate benefits, the social democrats and the conservatives advocated a system with income-related benefits, which they saw as a more just system for the wage-earning population. After years of debate, a political compromise was reached in 1963, according to which the benefits would become income-related, but with a minimum flat-rate sum and a collective financing structure administered by the Finnish National Social Insurance Institution, *Kansaneläkelaitos* (Kela) (Häggman, 1997).

Another example is the system of childcare support. In the 1970s, the issue of public childcare services surfaced, as women's rights organizations started to demand publicly funded childcare services, as an element of the struggle for gender rights and higher labour participation of mothers. However, among farmers and their wives public childcare was seen as unjust, since it would benefit wage-earning families, while leaving the farmers without benefit. As a consequence, farmers and their main political voice, the Centre Party (CP), launched a campaign to claim compensation in the form of a 'mother's wage', that is, a pecuniary acknowledgement of the work and care that is given at home (Tyyskä, 1995; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000). When the Child Day Care bill was finally presented in the Finnish parliament in 1973, it became subject to political debate, with the Centre Party opposing the bill and the political Left supporting it. Ultimately, the Centre Party supported the bill after some concessions from the Left to support a future extension of the child home care system, that is, the 'mother's wage' idea advocated by farmers (Anttonen & Sipilä, 2000; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000).

In the 1980s, the system of child home care allowance was introduced in some municipalities on an experimental basis and in 1985 the Child Home Care Allowance Act was passed as a part of a bigger policy package that reinforced the principle of universal public childcare and gradually extended the right for parents with children under three to either use public childcare or to receive home care allowance. This so-called subjective social right to childcare came into force in 1990, and was expanded to all children under school age in 1996 (Hiilamo, 2002). This duality of family policy values, the so-called principle of freedom of choice in matters of childcare, has continued to play an important role in Finnish family policy since then, providing freedom for parents to choose the form of work-family reconciliation they believe to be best for them and their children (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009). Lately, however, this principle has been criticized from a gender perspective, as mothers have been lagging behind as to earning levels, and rearranging this system has been discussed. Therefore, the question of whether or not a father should be 'obliged' to, but also entitled to, share the caring responsibility more equally with the mother, has been politicized and debated in all Nordic countries (e.g. Björk Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011; Duvander & Lammi-Taskula, 2011; Leira, 2006).

Previous research on the politics of family policy reveals ideological differences between left-wing and conservative parties in Finland (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; Kangas, 1986; Nygård, 2003, 2007, 2010; Tyyskä, 1995; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000). Whereas left-wing parties, notably the Social Democratic Party (SDP), have generally advocated public day care services and 'freedom of choice' in terms of the right for the mother to choose paid employment, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats (CD) have accentuated more traditional, or 'familist', values and championed 'freedom of choice' in terms of the right to care for small children at home and to receive child home care allowances from the state (Kangas, 1986; Nygård, 2007, 2010). The positions that parties take on family policy, however, tend to be conditioned by constitutional factors, such as the parliamentary status of

parties, or by strategic considerations that pertain to the party's ambition to maximize the number of votes in competition with rival parties (Autto, 2009, 2012, 2015). For instance, incumbent parties are generally more constrained by fiscal realities in their actions than are parties in opposition (Kitschelt, 2001). Yet family policy reforms can also be utilized as credit-seeking instruments in order to secure future voter support (Pierson, 2001).

It should also be noted that family policy positions of Finnish parties have changed a lot since the 'Golden Age' of welfare state expansion through the 'new politics of the welfare state' (Pierson, 1996, 2001), and decades of market internationalization and liberalization, leading to an increasing openness and competitiveness (Hemerijck, 2014; Huber & Stephens, 2001). Today, politicians and parties operate within stricter frames of manoeuvrability, due to the (perceived) pressures from globalization, but their world is also characterized by higher degrees of uncertainty, which is likely to increase the role of idea diffusion and social learning (e.g. Béland, 2009; Hulme, 2005). This can be seen, for example, in a form of higher susceptibility to dominant ideas and policy recommendations from international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, or the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, (Béland & Orenstein, 2013; Hemerijck, 2014), or supra-national bodies such as the European Union (Hay & Rosamond, 2002).

On the basis of this discussion, and the fact that the ongoing economic downturn and the growing ideational influence in terms of employment imperatives from the European Union have created an impetus for reform, we can expect an increasing politicization of gender and childcare in general, and the principle of freedom of choice in particular, in the Finnish 2015 election campaign. We can also expect influential 'insider' leftist parties (such as the Social Democrats), and smaller 'outsider' parties on the left (such as the Left Alliance [LA]), to be more prone to advocate a restriction of parents' use of child home care, and to support public childcare for the sake of greater gender equality and dual employment. Moreover, we expect both 'insider' and 'outsider' parties on the conservative flank to support both of these 'freedoms'.

Data and methods

The data consisted of eight election manifestos from the Finnish 2015 general election and five supplementary programmes (see Appendix 1). The data represent the eight largest parties in the Finnish parliament, namely the Centre Party (CP), Left Alliance (LA), NCP, The Finns Party (FP), SDP, SPP, Green League (GL) and Christian Democrats (CD). As well as this, we also used some supplementary party programmes, since the SDP had recently launched a special family policy programme to supplement their election manifesto, and the Finns Party used a number of supplementary programmes to substantiate their main (and rather short) election platform, which did not mention family policy at all. Also, since the NCP did not explicitly mention family policy in their manifesto, we used a proxy document in the form of a declaration of intent in relation to the ongoing government formation in April 2015. The main reason for focusing on parties, instead of governments or social partners, is that parties play a vital role in forming public opinion by framing political alternatives and that they play a central role in the actual policy-making process (Bourdieu, 1984; Mickelsson, 2007; Nousiainen, 1998).

For the empirical analysis we deployed qualitative content analysis, a research method that allows the researcher to analyse text data both explicitly and implicitly. In qualitative content analysis, the researcher examines the language used in the text data (Weber, 1990)

and engages in ‘subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns’ (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Content analysis can be conducted either deductively or inductively. The former starts from theory, which guides the construction of a coding scheme (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), while the latter extracts meaning from the text in an inductive way (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

We analysed the politicization of the principle of freedom of choice in relation to childcare; is freedom of choice understood as the freedom to choose to participate in paid labour while using day care, or is freedom of choice understood as the freedom to choose to stay at home taking care of a child while receiving the ‘mother’ wage? For our main departure point we deployed a deductive approach, but as it turned out during the analysis, we also needed to add an inductive approach, as the parties also emphasized the freedom of choice in relation to parental leave. The deductive approach, which Hsieh and Shannon (2005) calls directed content analysis, enables the researcher to search for meaning by using a coding scheme with pre-determined categories developed from theory or previous research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Previous research (e.g. Hiilamo, 2002; Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; Kangas, 1986; Nygård, 2007, 2010; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000) suggests that there has been an ideological divide between conservative and left-wing parties when it comes to family policy in general, and the principle of choice of freedom in particular. Whereas conservative parties have primarily advocated home care allowance and the traditional role of the family, left-wing parties have mainly advocated public childcare service. In a way, such family policy positions can be said to represent different views of the principle of ‘freedom of choice’. While the first position can be said to represent a choice between child home care and public care, the latter can be seen as a freedom (for mothers, and more recently also fathers) to choose paid labour (Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; Nygård, 2010). This divide guided the construction of the coding scheme, since we assume that there is still a division between conservative and left-wing parties, as described in previous research (see Table 1).

The first step of the analysis was to obtain a sense of the whole, which we achieved through initial readings of the programmes and after this we conducted a deeper analysis of the text corpuses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this second step of the analysis, we searched for explicit and implicit mentions related to different interpretations of freedom of choice in relation to childcare policy (see Table 1). Words or phrases we focused on were Finnish and Swedish mentions of ‘day care’, ‘childcare’, ‘parental leave’, ‘homecare allowance’, ‘freedom’ and ‘freedom of choice’.

The analysis process described in this paper was carried out in June and July 2015. We analysed 13 documents in total (see Appendix 1), and in order to substantiate our analysis, our categorizations and our interpretations of meaning, we have used some text excerpts as quotations.

Table 1. The coding scheme for the analysis of the politicization of freedom of choice in the Finnish 2015 election manifestos.

Freedom of choice in relation to childcare			
	‘Positive’ freedom	‘Negative’ freedom	General mentions
Main policy	• public childcare services	• child home care leave/allowance	• not specific
Main values	• gender equality and female employment	• traditional family values	• not specific

Findings

There was considerable variation in opinion on which policy fields needed to be prioritized in the election campaign, and in our analysis, the division in political opinion on freedom of choice in relation to family policy, and especially in relation to childcare policy, became evident. Six parties referred more explicitly to childcare policies (FP, CP, SDP, SPP, CD and LA), whereas others barely mentioned childcare policies (NCP and GL). It also became evident that the current economic situation, as well as the recent years of austerity measures, has resulted in a more strained politicization of the topic in question, making the parties more prone to reforms of existing policy schemes. The search for explicit and implicit mentions related to freedom of choice in relation to childcare policy resulted in two textual clusters: the first relating to the tension between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ freedom of choice within the child home care and public childcare systems, and the second relating to the politicization of these principles in the parental leave system. Below we examine these clusters, by first turning our attention to the debate on home care allowance and public childcare, and then to the parental leave debate.

Freedom of choice in relation to home care allowance and public childcare

The current Finnish family policy system provides parents with two options in relation to the care of small children (children under three): *either* one parent can stay at home taking care of the child, while receiving the state-subsidized home care allowance, *or* both parents can choose to participate in the labour market and place the child in public (or private) childcare. These two options represent the two main ideological ‘camps’ that became visible in our analysis: one consisting of most of the conservative parties defending (a ‘negative’) freedom of choice in terms of the home care allowance, and the other one consisting of left-wing parties implicitly defending (a ‘positive’) freedom of choice in terms of public childcare. However, the latter position was expressed only in implicit terms suggesting the child home care system seemed to be more controversial than the public childcare system, and thus became a focus for politicization by the parties. The different opinions and arguments used in this politicization of the child home care system are presented in Table 2.

As champions of the first camp, the Finns Party, Centre Party and Christian Democrats considered ‘freedom to choose’ as the right to stay at home taking care of the child and receive home care allowance, without the government deciding which parent should stay at home with the child. These parties also displayed a more traditional view of the family, where the roles of the spouses are divided more squarely into a (male) breadwinner and a (female) homemaker role. The parties also tended to share a common belief that a parent, or most notably the mother, is more important for the development of the young child and that public day care providers cannot fill this role.

The main departure point was that the family knows best what type of childcare suits them and therefore the government should not interfere. These parties also rejected the idea of a gender quota of the home care allowance. As an example, the Centre Party ‘acknowledges the families’ freedom of choice, [and] this goes equally for home care and day care’ (CP, 2015b, p. 6). Furthermore, the party suggests that ‘freedom to choose in the combining of family and work, supports the capacity of families to cope on their own’ (CP, 2015b, p.3).

Table 2. Opinions and arguments regarding freedom of choice in relation to the home care allowance.

Party	Opinion		Argument
Centre party	Freedom of choice is for families to take care of the child at home, receiving home care allowance.	Family knows best, family values and preferences	
Left alliance	Reject the idea of a gender quota of the home care allowance No specific opinion regarding freedom of choice. Home care allowance is among other social benefits, which should be replaced by the basic income		
National coalition party	The home care allowance system needs to be renewed		To better combine work and family life. Gender equality in family and work life
Finns party	Freedom of choice is for families to take care of the child at home, receiving home care allowance.		Family knows best. Family needs a genuine freedom to choose, no government control
Social democratic party	Reject the idea of a gender quota of the home care allowance No specific opinion regarding freedom of choice. The home care allowance need to promote equality and the transmission to the labour market		
Swedish people's party	Freedom of choice is to be able to choose paid labour. Reform of the home care allowance needed.		Prolonged period of time on home care will increase poverty among children
Green league	Critical of the home care allowance No specific opinion regarding the freedom of choice. The home care allowance is among other social benefits, which should be replaced by the basic income		
Christian democrats	Freedom of choice is for families to take care of the child at home, receiving home care allowance. Reject the idea of a gender quota of the 'child care allowance' (home care allowance)		Family knows best. Traditional view on the family. Home-like environment

According to the Christian Democrats, parents should stay at home taking care of the child. However, instead of using the term ‘home care allowance (*kotihoiton tuki*)’, they used ‘childcare allowance’ (*lapsen hoitotuki*). The party is a keen supporter of traditional family values, and by using the term ‘childcare allowance’ they can be said to pinpoint the importance of caring for the child (at home). The party also highlighted that ‘the families should have the right to choose how the childcare allowance should be divided between the parents’ (CD, 2015). Furthermore, they defended this standpoint by suggesting that ‘young children should be given the possibility [to] be cared for in the most home-like environments possible’ (CD, 2015).

As one of the defenders of the home care allowance, the Finns Party’s opposition to a gender quota is based on the notion that such a change would imply ‘a forced division of the homecare allowance’, and that is an ‘unsustainable idea’ (FP, 2015b). Furthermore, the party declared that it rejects governmental ‘control and coercion’ and that it prefers solutions that enhance ‘flexibility and the family’s freedom of choice’ (FP, 2015b). The party deprecated the idea of more governmental involvement suggesting that ‘the right to self-determination [...] has been taken away from several [people]’ (FP, 2015b).

The other ideological ‘camp’ that became visible in the analysis was the left-wing camp consisting of the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance supported by the social-liberal SPP. The parties in this camp emphasized the role of public childcare services although this position was not (implicitly) framed in terms of ‘positive’ freedom of choice. Instead, the parties supported a reform of the home care allowance system in order to make it more gender neutral. In other words, this position challenges the position taken by the conservative parties and suggests at least a partial infringement upon the traditional notion of ‘negative’ freedom of choice in the child home care system.

The SDP declared that one of the main pillars of the family policy system is the public and universal childcare service system, which provides wellbeing not only for families and their children, but also for the whole of society (SDP, 2015b). The principle of freedom of choice for parents was not, however, explicit in either the election manifesto, or the family policy programme. Instead, childcare services were considered something good for both children and for the employment of parents. This kind of ‘employment imperative’ has been inherent in the SDP, as well as other parties for a long time, and falls back upon the objectives outlined in the European Growth and Stability Pact. It has also been linked closely to the social inclusion objectives of the EU Lisbon Agenda (Hemerijck, 2014), since employment has been widely considered to be the best remedy against poverty among families (Eurofound, 2014). The SDP supported the subjective right to day care, and that families should be able to choose for themselves what childcare solution suits them best. However, in contrast to other parties, the party also mentioned disabled children’s right to qualitative care, both in public day care and domestic care. The party also pinpointed the importance of qualitative day care outside office hours, arguing that this would benefit the child and the parents, as well as society.

The SDP also suggested that the home care allowance needs to ‘support [gender] equality and the transition to the labour market’ which can be achieved by giving ‘both parents equal rights and possibilities to care for the child at home up until the child is three years of age’ (SDP, 2015b, p. 10). The party, however, did not explicitly support a state-regulated division of the home care allowance between the parents.

Another party which also took a critical approach on the homecare allowance was the SPP, suggesting that ‘families with small children that use the home care allowance for a longer period of time risk ending up in financial difficulties’ (SPP, 2015, p. 6). In order for families with children to avoid economic difficulties, the party supported the introduction of a gender quota in the home care allowance system, and therefore also a remodelling of the parental leave system in accordance with the ‘6+6+6 model’ (for arguments, see next subchapter). The party did not, however, explicitly support the right of the parents to choose to participate in the labour market, although it implicitly supported a flexible childcare service provision, as well as an effective reconciliation of family and working life. The same goes for the Left Alliance, which suggested that ‘everyone who wishes to have a permanent job and to work full-time should have the right of doing so’ (Left Alliance, 2015, p. 10). This could be interpreted as a statement that supports the parents’ right to participate in the labour market while using state-subsidized childcare, although this right was not framed in terms of a freedom of choice for parents.

Freedom of choice in relation to parental leave

Also parental leave was frequently highlighted in the election manifestos and the supplementary programmes (see Table 3). The current Finnish parental leave system consists of maternity and paternity leave, followed by parental leave. During this leave period, which extends until the child is around 10 months old, an income-based compensation is paid. After this, should one parent, or a grandparent, choose to stay home with the child, a state-subsidized home care allowance is paid. This amount, however, is lower than the income-based maternity and paternity leave (Kela, 2015). Here, the SPP, Green League and Left Alliance advocated an alternative parental leave system, namely the ‘6+6+6 model’. This

Table 3. Opinions and arguments regarding freedom of choice in relation to parental leave.

Party	Opinion	Argument
Centre party	Negative towards a governmental division of the parental leave, but recognizes the need of reviewing the current parental leave system	Family’s genuine freedom of choice, parental leave is an equal right between parents
Left alliance	Introduce the ‘6+6+6’ model	Financially more equal between gender and employers
National coalition party	Current paternity leave should be prolonged. One off payment to the mother’s employer once the mother returns to work	Gender equality, work and family life balance important, cost of parental leave more equally distributed between employers
Finns party	Negative towards a governmental division of the parental leave, but recognizes the need for renewing the current parental leave system	The family should have a genuine freedom to choose, financially more equal between employers
Social democratic party	Flexible parental leave: 16 months long parental leave (1+3+3+9)	Promoting, equality, guarantees the child is cared for at home for a longer period of time, sustainable careers and female employment
Swedish people’s party	Introduce the ‘6+6+6’ model	Financially more equal between gender and employers. Reduces poverty among children. Allows the father to take care of the child
Green league	Introduce the ‘6+6+6’ model	Financially more equal between employers
Christian democrats	Oppose the ‘6+6+6’ model, but recognizes the need for renewing the current parental leave system	The family knows best, but the costs for the employers are unequally distributed

model differs from the current parental leave system, since it consists of three paid leave periods, each period being six months. One period is reserved for the mother, one for the father and the third period can be freely divided between the mother and father.

Even though the Green League, Left Alliance and the SPP supported the '6+6+6 model', they had different opinions on why it should be introduced. The Green League and Left Alliance advocated the model from the employer's economic point of view, suggesting that the model is needed to equalize the now uneven distribution of costs between different employers. The Left Alliance argued that measures need to be taken in order to prevent discrimination against women in the labour market, and that the '6+6+6 model' is an attempt to equalize wage differences between men and women. The SPP also advocated the '6+6+6 model', but for somewhat other reasons. The party pointed out that the current parental leave system is no longer sufficient and needs to be changed in order to 'ensure the welfare of children and promote gender equality in families, and in the labour market' (SPP, 2015b, p. 5). The party considered the '6+6+6 model' a good solution, as it would strengthen gender equality, and since it would put the child's best interest in first place. Firstly, the '6+6+6 model' would promote gender equality, since mothers would return to work earlier. Previous research (e.g. Gíslason, 2011) pinpoint that one of the major reasons why women lag behind in levels of salary is longer breaks, such as maternity and parental leave, during a woman's career. Therefore, the SPP suggest that the '6+6+6 model' would profit mothers economically, since equally dividing the childcare leave between the mother and father would lead to mothers not lagging behind as to the level of salary and pension. Furthermore, it would give fathers the opportunity (and responsibility) to stay at home to take care of the child, which would enhance a more even distribution of the costs for childcare between all employers. According to the party, the '6+6+6 model' would show that 'parenthood [...] concerns both women and men' (SPP, 2015b, p. 6).

Secondly, the party suggests that this division would benefit the children, as child poverty rates would be reduced, due to the fact that the parental allowance is income-based, and the amount is therefore higher than the home care allowance. Parents could claim income-based parental allowance up until the child is roughly 18 months of age, compared to the current system, according to which the parents can only claim income-related parental allowance until the child is 9–10 months (Kela, 2015).

On the other hand, the Christian Democrats, the Centre Party and the Finns Party opposed an alternative parental leave model. The main argument for opposing a governmental division of the parental leave was that it, according to the three opposing parties, would take away the families' freedom to choose. The Christian Democrats explicitly opposes the '6+6+6 model' arguing that it is 'wrong' and the decision 'should be withdrawn' (Christian Democrats, 2015). The Christian Democrats based their position on their belief that parents know what is best for the child and the family, and that small children should be taken care of in homelike environments. On the other hand, the party also suggested that 'the division of costs due to parenthood in the labour market needs to be renewed' (CD, 2015), but they did not mention any specific alteration to the parental leave scheme.

The Centre Party did not explicitly mention the '6+6+6 model', but they emphasized that a governmental division of the parental leave would be a negative alteration. The party used the Finnish term 'pakkojako', which here translates to a (negative) 'forced division' of the parental leave system. The Centre Party mentioned that 'the families should have a

genuine freedom to choose' when it comes to deciding what childcare and leave arrangements suit them best (CP, 2015a, p. 4). On the other hand, the Centre Party did mention that the current parental leave system 'should be developed to take into account the needs of the mothers, the fathers, the children, the employees and the employers', with a special emphasis on the needs of the children (CP, 2015b, p. 6). As an alternative to the current parental leave system, they suggested that a 'moderate extension of a quota for fathers' should take place and that the long-term objective would be to 'prolong the duration of the parental leave' (CP, 2015b, p. 11). However, the party implicitly distanced itself from the '6+6+6 model', pointing out that 'the complexity of everyday life cannot be broken down into schematic quotas: the best interests of the child are always to be put first' (CP, 2015b, p. 11). According to the party, parental leave policy is not the right forum to strive for gender equality, since 'the development of the parental leave system is not benefitted by objectives based on streamlined notions of gender equality' (CP, 2015b, p. 6). Even though the Centre Party is not supportive of the '6+6+6 model', the party emphasized that 'parental leave and the care of the child is the equal right of the parents' (CP, 2015b, p. 6).

The Finns Party also took a critical approach on a division of the parental leave, similar to that of the Centre Party, by referring to an alternative parental leave scheme as 'a forced division'. Even though the Finns Party did not explicitly mention the '6+6+6 model', they implicitly argued against this model by using rhetorical phrases such as 'governmental control' and 'forced division of the parental leave'. Having said that, it also needs to be pointed out that they, similarly to the Christian Democrats, considered some kind of an alteration of the current parental leave scheme to be warranted in order for the system to become more just in terms of the distribution of costs between different employers, but this did not imply a governmental division of the parental leave. They claimed that 'society must support people in their individual efforts to reconcile family and work, and alike, appreciate the parents who remain at home to care for children' (FP, 2015b).

According to the SDP, equality is one important characteristic of the welfare state, and the party therefore supports mothers' participation in paid labour. They suggested, that 'the aim is to equally divide the parental leave between the parents' (SDP, 2015a, p. 18). They also suggested a more flexible parental leave scheme, which consists of a 16-month long parental leave. Both parents would be entitled to a period of three months of parental leave, as well as one month of prenatal parental leave for the mother. In addition to this, a freely distributed nine-month leave period should be available for the parents. According to the party, this would guarantee that the child could be cared for at home during a longer period of time, compared to the current model (SDP, 2015b, p. 14). The party also pointed out that the flexible parental leave for the father should apply until the child has reached three years of age. The main motive behind this more flexible parental leave scheme would be to promote 'equality, sustainable careers and female employment' (SDP, 2015b, p. 14).

The NCP (2015b) emphasized the importance of a functioning arrangement between work and caring obligations. The party stressed gender equality and suggested a prolonging of the paternity leave would do this. It also highlighted that the costs of parental leave should be more equally distributed among employers, and suggested that this could be done through a one-off payment to the mother's employer once the mother returns to work after being on parental leave.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have examined the politicization of the freedom of choice in relation to childcare policy during the Finnish general election of 2015 by analysing election manifestos, and supplementary programmes, from the eight most influential political parties in Finland. On the basis of this analysis, three main conclusions can be drawn.

First, we can see that the principle of freedom of choice still holds sway in Finnish parties' constructions of childcare policy. This principle was highlighted most notably in relation to the future of the child home care system, as well as in the discussion about a remodelling of the parental leave system. When it comes to the public childcare system, however, we found no explicit mentions of freedom of choice, even if it seems clear that most parties implicitly supported this kind of public service. We also found considerable variation between parties when it comes to the textual attention that they gave childcare policy and the principle of freedom of choice. While the SDP, the SPP, the Centre Party, the Christian Democrats and the Finns Party were quite active in discussing these matters, the Green League, Left Alliance and especially the NCP did not highlight these matters to any greater extent. Somewhat surprisingly, none of the analysed parties mentioned the need to restrict the subjective right to public childcare, although a restriction of the subjective right to whole-day childcare was something that happened to be on the government's agenda, but was withdrawn, just before the parliamentary election in April 2015. It is also interesting to note that the new Centre-right government which was formed after the election actually placed this cutback back onto the agenda and that the right to full-day public childcare was restricted for families with one or both parents being unemployed or being on family leave in December of 2015 (Hallituksen esitys HP 80/2015 vp, 2015). The right to child home care allowance/leave, on the other hand, was not restricted, which probably has to do with the fact that the Prime Minister's party, the Centre Party, has been one of the foremost advocates of this policy.

Secondly, we found a clear ideological divide between parties in terms of views on freedom of choice, as well as the arguments being used in order to legitimate their positions. While the Finns Party, the Christian Democrats and the Centre Party advocated a 'negative' freedom for parents to choose between home care and public childcare, and stressed that the home care allowance system should be preserved in order to offer parents this genuine freedom, the Social Democrats and the Left Alliance (supported by the SPP) criticized the home care allowance (and its inherent 'negative' freedom of choice) for creating traps for women and for being counterproductive to parental employment. This result largely confirms the findings in earlier research on family policy positions of Finnish parties (e.g. Nygård, 2010; Välimäki & Rauhala, 2000) suggesting that there is still an ideological divide between parties on the right and parties on the left in matters relating to the family and to the question on what the state ought to do, or not do, for families with children. This divide tends to boil down to the essential question of whether parents should be given the right to choose child home care or not, and whether or not such a freedom constitutes an illegitimate infringement upon the imperatives of gender equality and parental employment. Although the divide is not a straightforward left-right divide, with some of the smaller 'outsider' parties (such as the Green League and the SPP) and one of the 'insider' parties (NCP) taking a middle position, the findings suggest that there still exists a dualistic view on childcare policy, and most notably on what kind of 'freedom of choice' the state should support (cf. Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009). In the conservative party camp, both home care and

public childcare are viewed as important, while the leftist parties implicitly support childcare while suggesting an introduction of a gender quota in the home care system.

As noted above, most of the analysed parties (either implicitly or explicitly) supported the public childcare system, although its virtues were not framed so much in terms of parents' freedom to choose between paid work and family roles. Instead, the main arguments behind a preservation and future development of this system were that it has a positive influence on parental employment, which at the same time prevents child poverty, and that it facilitates work–family balance.

The ideological divide observed in relation to childcare also seemed to pertain to the issue of parental leave, and most notably the proposed '6+6+6 model'. The parties advocating the '6+6+6 model' believed it to create a fairer division of the parental leave, since it would spread the costs of parental leave more equally between employers, and gender equality would be created, as women would return to work sooner, and the *right to* and *responsibility for* parenting would more equally concern both the mother and the father. Furthermore, this model would enhance the flexibility needed for creating a well-functioning daily life. By contrast, the parties that were opposing the '6+6+6 model' believed it to be a 'forced division', infringing on the home care allowance system. Allegedly, the family knows best what childcare arrangements suit them, and there is a fear that this freedom of choice is taken away if the government sets up alternative guidelines.

Surprisingly enough, we found very little textual attention on family policy in the NCP manifesto. The only thing that related to this policy field was a mention emphasizing the importance of 'creative day care' and the importance for children to learn to communicate at a young age (NCP, 2015a). It can only be speculated as to why the NCP, being one of the largest 'insider' parties, chose to downplay family policy, as well as the issue of freedom of choice, in their 2015 manifesto. One plausible explanation is that the party has recently played a visible role in the proposed downscaling of child benefits, effective from the beginning of 2015, and that it may have considered it to be too great an electoral risk to discuss further family policy reforms in their election manifesto. If so, this can be interpreted as a 'strategy of avoiding', which enables political actors to shun topics that they see as challenging to their traditional ideological positions, or that are simply seen as too controversial (cf. Autto, 2015).

Thirdly, although the findings show that the principle of 'freedom of choice' within Finnish family policy, and especially in childcare policy, has not lost its importance, they tend to suggest a gradual renegotiation of the meaning and role of this principle, at least when it comes to the parties on the left as well as the smaller parties in the political centre. Not only did the left-wing parties and the SPP criticize the 'negative' freedom of choice as well as the home care allowance system, but we also found that they were willing to renegotiate the role of this freedom in favour of higher gender equality and parental promotion. Similarly, the availability of public childcare was not framed explicitly in terms as a 'freedom to choose', but as a means to create higher parental employment and gender equality. To what extent this constitutes an ideological attack on the traditional agrarian/conservative idea of a 'mothers' wage', and whether or not this will lead to a future downscaling of this particular kind of 'negative' freedom of choice in Finnish childcare policy, still remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the principle of freedom of choice is indeed a contested one, not least in elections campaigns, and that the ideological configuration of the government, but also the economic context, plays a decisive role for

what elements of the childcare system become subject to reform. It is also possible that the politicization that we observed in the election platforms as well as the recent restriction of the right to full-day public childcare provision are signs of a paradigmatic change in the Finnish family policy system that will infringe upon the uniqueness of the Finnish model and undermine the universality of its childcare system. If this is the case it may be interpreted as a partial undermining of the 'Nordicness' of the family policy model and a policy direction that goes against that of many other European countries, such as Germany with its recent investments in public childcare (cf. Nygård, Campbell-Barr, & Krüger, 2013).

In order to make any qualified predictions as to the future of the 'mothers' wage in Finnish family policy, we need to extend the analysis to other platforms than election manifestos, since the results from this study provide us with only a limited view of parties' childcare positions from one parliamentary election campaign. Therefore, an area for future research would be to extend the analysis to also other textual data, such as government programmes or political speeches, and to also include the positions of social partners such as the trade unions.

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Appendix: the analysed programmes

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